

## A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHINESE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICY

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### ABSTRACT

*In order to meet the demands of labor markets and enhance national competitiveness in the tertiary industry, Chinese Ministry of Education gives utmost attention to cultivation of professional personnel in educational systems. It employs market-led strategy and mainly focus on improving immediate employment of graduates. However, as the modern technology develops so quickly, conventional work patterns may experience great changes in the near future and a new trend of liberal vocational education has been attracting a lot of attention around the world. To better adapt to the future business world internationally and enhance individuals' well-being, it is essential to equip students with great flexibility as well as autonomy after their graduations. On the other hand, careful examinations of specific contextual conditions of China including traditional culture and socio-economic conditions shall be the prerequisite to launch a successful and effective reform in vocational education. Establishing international adaptability as well as national identity in policy translation is the key to realize a feasible and high-quality vocational education reform.*

**KEYWORDS:** Market-Led Strategy, Liberal Vocational Education, Flexibility, Autonomy, Specific Contextual Conditions of China

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### INTRODUCTION

With the access to WTO, Chinese market economy has been experiencing a profound change in its structure as well as the demand of work forces. In order to enhance the competitiveness in the global market, it becomes increasingly crucial to provide high quality vocational education and training (VET) so as to provide more profitable high value-added production and services. To support the industrialization and the transformation of economic growth in China, VET is transformed to be a key factor in socio-economic development and laid the foundation of educational strategy, aiming to train individuals to be highly-skilled and meet the immediate demands of the production, construction, management and service industries (Mi & Wu, 2009). It employs a market-orientation strategy to prepare students for the immediate employment and seeks a wide range of international cooperation in the reform of VET. However, the effectiveness and suitability of those programs need to be carefully examined according to the new trend of world work patterns and the complex cultural and socio-economic conditions in Chinese context. According to Oketch, Green and Preston (2009), as a result of scientific and technological advances, the global demands for skills have been changed substantially and require workers to possess multiple skills and the ability to adapt rapidly through continuous learning. Changes in technology and patterns of work organization make the demands of market increasingly unpredictable. Therefore, the market-oriented strategy which focuses on meeting the current demands of labour forces would probably lose competitiveness when the new technologies and working patterns arise. On the other hand, the evaluation of

suitability and influences of imported VET policies is also essential to formulate an effective VET strategy. Currently, Chinese VET policy makers have been engaging in drawing successful experiences from other developed countries. However, many empirical evidences and educational researches show that the possibility of successful international cooperation seems very minimal because of unconscious policy borrowing process. According to Phillips and Ochs (2004), policy borrowing ought to refer to a clearly enunciated intention to adopt a new way of doing things, rather than a less well-defined susceptibility to influence through the general recognition of the importance shown to particular practices elsewhere. Thus, conscious reflection of those practices in policy 'at home' is essential to guarantee the effectiveness of the policy borrowing. In this essay, I will mainly focus on the analysis of the content of VET policy and examination of VET policy borrowing process for the purpose of providing some inspirations to VET reform in China.

## **AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT OF CHINESE VET POLICY**

### **Building Individuals' Flexibility**

In order to solve the problem of highly-skilled labor forces shortage, Chinese VET system takes a market-led strategy to guide the reform of VET curriculum as well as the whole educational structure. Apart from meeting the current demands of market, cultivating individuals' flexibility is also very important in enhancing the competitiveness of the labor market. With the shifting nature of technology development, it is difficult to respond quickly to the changing demands of global market if the VET system is entirely designed based on the current demands of labor market. Thailand (1991) states that "the process of technological change is little understood, it is difficult to foresee the abilities that new technologies will require and, consequently, difficult to plan realistically for them." (p. 37) Increasingly, under the influence of the fast development of technology and wide spread diffusion of information, it becomes impossible to concisely predict the demand of the market; while innovation is essential for blooming economy in nowadays changing market. In a constantly changing environment, it is more profitable to learn how to learn and generate innovation rather than merely master a certain kind of skill. According to Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996), "globally competitive businesses don't any longer really compete on the basis of their products or services per se. They compete, rather, on the basis of how much learning and knowledge they can leverage [i.e. capture and exploit in profitable ways] in order to expeditiously invent, produce, distribute and market their goods and services, as well as to innovatively vary and customize them." (p.5) Under this circumstance, the curriculum which focuses on meeting the current demand of labour market would probably be outdated soon. Even though it would contribute to solving the problem of highly-skilled labor forces shortage temporarily, the long-term value of VET needs to be questioned. "Competition for markets has become increasingly fierce, leading to an emphasis on innovation in order to cater for (and create) the tastes of increasingly diverse and demanding consumers." (Dovey, 2006, p. 390) Thus, cultivating individual's flexibility and the innovative spirit in the workplace should be emphasised in the formulation of VET strategy so as to generate long-term vitality of economic development.

On the other hand, guiding by the market-led strategy, the designing of VET curriculum would probably lead to the sacrifice of individuals' personal development in the future competitive market. According to Koudahl (2010), this kind of VET model which mainly depends on the firm's and companies' willingness may run the risk that the apprentices only acquire a rather narrow qualification profile and they would be very vulnerable to changing economic conditions. Nowadays, the world of work has been substantially changed by liberalization, globalization and rapid technological changes. The lifetime of employment experiences a new trend towards frequent and multiple career changes, part-time and casual work. According to Agrawal (2009), the work force needs to be flexible and adaptable and the emphasis should be

on competitiveness, interpersonal skills and the ability to sustain employment by adapting to changing job requirements and circumstances. Therefore, in order to keep up with the constantly changing demands of labor market as well as empower individual in the competitive environment in a long run, it is essential to look beyond the current market demands and cultivate individuals' flexibility to various working patterns.

### **Embrace Liberal Education in VET Reform**

Apart from the market-orientation VET strategy, the main purpose of VET reform is also deserved careful consideration in order to build a society with high level quality products and services. Due to the changing pattern of world work, the ability of integrating cross disciplinary knowledge is essential for producing innovation and adapting to various environments. The workplace skill is grander than mere observable function (Lum, 2003). Single-skilled individuals probably could not meet the shifting demands of workforce. Currently, facing with the desperate shortage of labor forces, the main aim of the reform of VET in China is to promote the immediate employment of graduates and half of the higher educational institutions would be transformed to focus on vocational education and training. To achieve this purpose, job qualification attainment has been put much emphasis and as a result, the liberal value of education is neglected by society to a great extent. However, obtaining various certificates do not entirely represent that an individual possesses the substantial ability in the world of work. According to Mclean (1995), taxonomies of skill are not capable of consistent interpretation or application and workers in high-technology manufacture are expected to have high initial competence in rational thinking and good communication skills. "Training for a specific occupation or event clusters of occupations is being supplanted by strategies for 'general sable skills' or general transferable education, a theme on which there has been a great volume of discourse." (Skilbeck, Connell, Lowe & Tait, 1994, p. 15) We can see that there is a new requirement for the vocational skills, which demanding for the interdisciplinary ability. The current reform of Chinese VET which emphasizes on solving employment problems in the labor market might probably run the risk of generating certifications blindly, while neglect the cultivation of general vocational ability.

Furthermore, what the competitive labor market really needs are not only the highly-skilled workers but also well-educated individuals. A truly high standard vocational education should not be deprived of the liberal value. To achieve a high-level of productivity and provide good services in society, beautiful personality is of as much importance as high-level working skills. "Disaffected or poorly educated citizens are unlikely to value the wider contribution to society that their work may make, and are less likely to take seriously the social role and obligations that their employment implies." (Winch, 2000, p.183) Probably, if the reform focuses too much emphasis on the promoting of employment and economic development, it would reduce the intrinsic value of education and put the liberal education in a second place in educational system. Lewis (2009) states that when vocational education is conceived narrowly in terms of observable skill and in purely economic terms, the curriculum with instrumental intention will probably un-educative. The most valuable thing that education can contribute to economic flourish is to open individuals' mind and cultivate their craft attentiveness. According to Oketch (2007), the lines between the liberal and the vocational education have become blurred. The aim of VET has been extended from the merely preparation for the paid employment to the cultivation of an individual's integrated ability as well as wholesome personality. In all, to achieve the effectiveness of the reform and build a better society, it is crucial to take a more holistic and broader view to look beyond the instrumental value of VET.

### **Enhance Individuals' Fulfillment and Autonomy**

Another important thing that deserves policy makers' attention is that the reform of VET shall aim to build individuals' well-being, since human beings are the purpose for which wealth exists. The fulfilment and autonomy in one's working life are also significant indicators to assess the quality of VET. Seeking the material prosperity is a necessary but not the only element in building individuals' well-being. According to Winch (2000), the necessity of working is concerned to make a worthwhile experience, not just that of the occupational status quo. The most important thing for education is to develop people's autonomy and liberty in life-choices and empower people to choose any kind of satisfying occupation, so as to enhance individuals' well-being. While, based on the concept of knowledge-economy, there is a common realization that human capital is the core-competitiveness in international market and a lot of efforts have been made to develop individuals' working skills. Guiding by this ideology, the recent reform of Chinese VET puts much emphasis on the development of practical working skills through cooperation with enterprises and it intends to encourage individuals to seek professional expertise. However, many evidences reflect that a large number of individuals are not satisfied with their working life and they do not possess much autonomy in choosing their jobs. "It was recommended that students should be exposed to a variety of work of a practical nature, to become oriented towards work, and be given time to explore various vocational options before choosing their final field of specialization." (Agrawal, 2009, p. 193) According to Mi and Wu (2009), the objective of VET in China is to cultivate reliable and functional individuals. In most cases, many students choose subjects without getting acquainted with practical work and experiences and the opportunities to change to another subject are also very limited. Therefore, based on the current VET system and curriculum, it is difficult for students to choose their educational experiences as well as vocational path autonomously. Even though the schools cannot create jobs (Nash, 1983), they can facilitate economic development by encouraging individuals' proactive enterprising spirit and at the same time enhance personal well-being through shaping their future more autonomously. "If we are to shape the future in ways which will facilitate social progress, formal systems of education and training, it will need to prepare a much larger proportion of worker/citizens to contribute to the decision-making process and to be more self-directed." (Brown & Lauder in Bash & Green, 1995, p.29) Nelson-Rowe (1991) also suggests that the interests and values of individuals' would shape the organization of vocational education and its impact on labor markets. Therefore, apart from vocational skill training, endowing students with comprehensive abilities, such as the interpersonal skills and determinate leadership, which is vital to enhance individuals' well-being, should also be the emphasis in formulating VET strategy.

In all, influenced by the globalization and liberalization, there are a lot of new demands on VET. To achieve an efficient VET reform of long-term value, it is crucial for Chinese educational policy makers to keep up with the new trends and directions of VET. Seeking international cooperation and learning from the successful experiences of other countries become very important in the international world. In recent years, a series of approaches have been set up to improve VET educational practices in multiple orientations. However, to better understand what contributes to a successful educational reform, it is also important to examine the process of policy borrowing. In the following section of my essay, the analysis of the suitability as well as the influences of imported VET policies in China would be provided.

### **An Analysis of Policy Borrowing Processes of Chinese VET System**

From above-mentioned, we can see that in order to meet the constantly changing market, it is essential to converge with the new directions of international VET ideology in formulating its content and strategy. Apart from the convergence with international trend of VET development, building adaptability and national identity divergently in policy

borrowing process are also very important factors to assess the effectiveness and the quality of VET reform. Currently, the reform of VET system in China is greatly influenced by the international standards and the 'best practice' from various developed countries, especially the 'dual system' of Germany and the 'Apprenticeship' in UK. However, the outcomes of those programs are not very desirable due to the policies' unsuitability to local context. According to Phillips and Ochs (2003), "careful examination of the context in both the 'home' and 'target' countries is essential to evaluate compatibility and comparability and so to determine what it is possible to borrow, given different cultural mores, demographics, etc." (p. 458) In the following part of my essay, I will mainly focus on analyzing the specific contextual conditions of China as well as the importance of preserving indigenous educational conventions in enhancing national competitiveness in the global world.

### **Different Cultural Conditions**

Compared with the western countries, China possesses very different cultural and socio-economic conditions, which pose great difficulty in policy borrowing process. Different from Germany's highly-regarded VET system, the academic education is considered of much more esteem than vocational education in China. The majority of Chinese students today seek academic education, because of the elite status attached to it (Cooke, 2005). Influenced by the Confucian philosophy, the view of 'a good scholar will make an official' is deeply ingrained in Chinese individuals' mind-set. Thus, VET in China is downgraded to the second choice when students choose their educational tracks. According to Yu (2004), the majority of individuals in China still hold the ways of thinking that 'those who work with their mind should rule people, whereas those who work with their physical strengths should be ruled'. Barabasch, Huang and Lawson (2009) also indicate that manual work, blue-collar workers and tradesmen in China are deprived of self-esteem because of the influence of long-lasting feudalistic structures. Therefore, a system which greatly focuses on practical vocational training might be greatly deprived of attractiveness to students. On the contrary, to most of German students, seeking the vocational education is their normal track and pursuing professional vocation is a good choice to gain social identification. According to Mclean (1995), "profession and craft have been powerful indicators of social status and self-esteem in Germany." (p. 42) Due to the different social ideologies, the way of promoting and reforming VET systems should be diverged from the perspective of different cultural conditions. In China, it would be advisable to connect the VET with academic education as much as possible and give students more opportunities to change their educational paths freely. Even though the Chinese educational department has made great effort to change the social ideology and put much emphasis on increasing the quality of VET, it still cannot appeal to students as well as parents, even the teaching staff. Only if it manages to combine academic with vocational education and leaves options to pursue higher education open, can the VET gain recognition from the society (Yu, 2004). The distinguished division from higher academic education makes it self-evidently lack of esteem and recognition based on the society's inherent concept, since it will pose much constraint for individuals to pursue academic education. Therefore, to promote the vocational education in China, it is essential to take the traditional elite culture into careful consideration so as to establish an appealing VET system.

### **Different Socio-Economic Conditions**

Apart from the different cultural conditions, the socio-economic developments of China are also varied from western countries in many aspects. Cautious examination of situations of current labor market and economic developments in China is crucial to guarantee the effectiveness of VET reform in the ever changing environment. First of all, the unsound development of Chinese economic market poses great constraint on the implementation of dual system due to the lack of

training places provision. Currently, even though Chinese ministry of education has been engaging in encouraging the cooperation between enterprises and vocational schools, there are less evidences show the desirable outcomes. One of the most important reasons is greatly due to the lack of involvement and active participation of enterprises. According to Koudahl (2010), it is the main precondition for enterprises to provide a sufficient number of training places in the implementation of dual system. However, according to the current situation of the development of Chinese business market, it seems impossible for enterprises to provide a high quality of training for the students in VET institutions. Compared with the highly-organized German enterprises which take training as a long-term investment for industry (Agrawal, 2009), a large number of enterprises in China are still in an initial stage and do not possess the capability of modern training management as well as sound training systems. Therefore, the implication of dual system in China is not very feasible according to the current situation of the enterprises development.

What's more, in the light of administrative management, there are no efficient mechanisms to facilitate the cooperation between enterprises and vocational education and analyze the changing demands of labor market. "It is characteristic that countries that have organized VET according to the principle of dual education have a very high degree of organization and regulation of the labor market." (Koudahl, 2010, p. 1902) In German, the political culture is more corporatists and the dual system of Germany is workplace centered and employer dominated (McClean, 1995). Meanwhile, the partnership between state and employers is effectively guaranteed by trade unions. While, in China, due to the large territory, the organization and management of VET system are quite different from one locality to another. Additionally, the professional level of VET institutions and the demands of labor market are varied according to the unbalanced economic development. Thus, it is difficult for Chinese government to implement highly-organized VET systems which can quickly respond to the shifting demands of market. Advisably, the best way to solve those problems might be extracting the innovations of foreign policy and reconstructing the current indigenous systems based on the analysis of specific cultural and socio-economic conditions. According to Barabasch, Huang and Lawson (2009), Germany's successful VET system needs to be viewed as offering structural innovations which than have to be guided by policies and regulating mechanisms taking into account specific problems in the Chinese educational environment, and adapted to realities. Khamsi (2014) also states that "policy borrowing is never wholesale, but always selective and, by implication, reflects the 'socio-logic' or context-specific reasons for receptiveness." (p. 156) In order to implement the dual system successfully in Chinese context, it would be recommendable to provide some financial or managerial support to those enterprises that would like to take the responsibility of offering training places and meanwhile, reframe the dual system to make it adjust to the different local conventions. According to Khamsi (2014), drawing on broadly defined international standards or "best practices" without capturing the act of local adaptation, modification, or reframing of an imported reform would result in a 'deterritorialized' policy borrowing, which will lead into the failure of policy translation. Therefore, in order to translate a foreign policy successfully, it is necessary to analyze the feasibility as well as adapt it to the local specialized cultural and socio-economic conditions.

### **Maintaining National Identity**

In addition, another important issue in policy borrowing process is that how to keep the indigenous educational conventions and national identities. Even though the imported policy may exert a great contribution to the development of its current educational practices, the most important thing in enhancing competitiveness in the international world is to develop one's own indigenous educational system. According to McClean (1995), "those national systems of vocational

education which are currently admired may be the product of a felicitous but ephemeral coincidence of historic traditions and current economic-occupational demands. Each country may be advised to seek its own unique blend of old and new.” (p. 33) From examining the cooperation programmes between China and western countries, it clearly shows that the dependence on the use of expatriate staff and western equipment and machinery prevents the development of truly indigenous programmes (Watson, 1994). Under the influence of globalization, western paradigms have been playing an increasingly important role in shaping thinking in developing countries. However, each kind of ideology is formulated and developed through its own historical and cultural conditions. Only the educational system which is influenced by traditional ideology can generate more influential impacts on the reform of VET and maintain the strongest and longest vitality in enhancing national competitiveness. In this sense, besides promoting the economic growth, education also plays a very important role in keeping national identity so as to maintain international competitiveness in a long run. Thailand (1991) indicates that “education makes and remakes cultures through the dialectical process of reproducing and rejecting, continuing and questioning.” (p. 11) Considering the recent VET reform in China, many approaches it has taken seem to be deprived of traditional conventions and swayed by the arguments put forward by multinational agencies. To solve this problem, it is essential to carefully examine Chinese traditional way of VET and find an effective way to reform it so as to meet the needs of contemporary society. “Vocational education more firmly is the outcome of national historic conditions.” (McLean, 1995, p. 35) Each country has to develop their own educational system based on the specific conditions, rather than replace it with imported paradigms. Lewis (2009) also states that “vocational education is more likely to thrive in countries where it has enjoyed long historical tradition anchored by transcending ideologies that shape the thinking about skill and nation building.” (p. 559) Therefore, besides conscious policy borrowing process, how to reshape indigenous educational systems of national identity is also a key factor to enhance competitiveness in the global economy.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this essay mainly discussed the new ideologies and directions for formulating VET strategy in the constantly changing global market and put forward some assumptions for conscious policy borrowing process. Influenced by rapid development of technology, the growth of economy greatly depends on the flexibility of the workforce as well as the distinguished competitiveness rooted in national identity. Through analyzing the implications of current Chinese VET policy, it clearly shows that the strategy fails to keep up with the new ideologies of VET in the global market and the policy borrowing process needs to pay much attention on the divergent conditions of local context. According to Mi and Wu (2009), there will be further efforts to be made to raise the quality of Chinese VET system by optimizing it through diversification and alignment with the lifelong learning system. However, in order to implementing those programs effectively, it is of crucial importance to critically examine the rationale of the strategy and the ways in which those policies are made so as to build national competitiveness in the future world of globalization.

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